

WILLIAM TYNDALE'S IDEAS ABOUT CONVERSION

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Studies on the theme of conversion in the early years of the English Reformation often begin with Thomas Cranmer. It seems that William Tyndale may almost have escaped notice.¹ Well known as a Bible translator, he is not always thought of as a theologian. Yet he wrote theology. At that time the question of how people could be rightly related to God provoked both considerable interest and considerable complexity of opinion. To this debate Tyndale made his own distinctive contribution.

We might ask: what use did Tyndale make of conversion vocabulary? How did he enunciate a theology of conversion? Did he teach that it is possible for people to prepare themselves to receive divine grace? Was there a model which Tyndale proposed as a standard to which conversions should conform or by which they should be assessed? When translating Luther, did Tyndale interpolate any ideas or emphases of his own, especially about conversion?

A. G. Dickens said that Tyndale's time was marked by 'the desire of many laymen (and indeed of some priests) to be free of hierarchical control and canon law, to become responsible for their own souls before God.'² It was an era when doctrinal change was an extremely disturbing phenomenon, most unwelcome to those in authority. But as F. F. Bruce put it Tyndale 'judged it necessary to contend earnestly for the Reformed faith and to play his part with vigour in the theological...disputation of

¹ For example: Ashley Null, *Thomas Cranmer's Doctrine of Repentance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); 'Salvation and sanctification in the Book of Homilies,' *Reformed Theological Review* 61, 2003; 'Thomas Cranmer and Tudor Evangelicalism' in Michael A. G. Haykin and Kenneth J. Stewart, eds., *The Emergence of Evangelicalism* (Nottingham: Apollos, 2008). Null writes about solifidianism (justification by faith alone), includes several references to conversion, but does not mention Tyndale; L. B. Tipson, 'The Development of a Puritan Understanding of Conversion,' unpublished PhD thesis, Yale University 1972. When dealing with the English Reformation Tipson begins with Cranmer; N. Pettit, *The Heart Prepared: Grace and Conversion in Puritan Spiritual Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966). Pettit's chief interest is Puritan thought after 1570. Pettit adduces inadequate evidence to support his few assertions about Tyndale's ideas. See also A. M. Blanch, 'The Development of Ideas about Conversion in Protestant Theology in England, 1520–1540,' unpublished MA (Hons) thesis, Sydney University, 1982. This deals chiefly with Tyndale, Bilney, Frith and Barnes.

² A. G. Dickens, *The English Reformation* (London: Batsford, 1964), p. 32.

the day,' while G. E. Duffield maintained that 'Tyndale develops a strong covenant theology, which is not paralleled in Luther.'³

Conversion vocabulary

How did Tyndale use conversion vocabulary? Sometimes he used the word 'convert' with the general meaning of becoming a Christian, saying that 'Augustine, before he was converted, was an heathen man.'⁴ His *Prologue to Galatians* recorded that 'Paul...converted the Galatians, and coupled them to Christ.'⁵ Very much more often conversion vocabulary was used as a synonym for repentance. In his *Prologue to Hebrews* he twice used as alternatives 'repentance, or conversion' and continued that those who 'willingly refuse the light, and choose rather to dwell in darkness, and refuse Christ...cannot be renewed (*eis metanoian* saith the Greek), to be converted.'⁶ He defined repentance in the *Prologue to Matthew*: 'to turn in the heart and mind, and to come to the right knowledge, and to a man's right wit again...the very sense and signification both of the Hebrew and also of the Greek word is, to be converted and turn to God with all the heart, to know his will and to live according to his laws.'⁷

Metanoia, usually translated 'repentance,' signifies a change of mind. Therefore Tyndale emphasised the importance of the Bible, his only guide to truth. 'I find in the Scripture...I find in the Scripture' was his refrain, because the scriptures bear the authority of God. The Bible teaches God's law and grace, the law to show people their spiritual state and peril, the promises to assure them of divine mercy.

In the Preface to *The Obedience of the Christian Man*, Tyndale set out steps by which people might be converted to God:

Teach the people God's law, and what obedience God requireth of us... and with what friendly love he commendeth one to love another...and prove that no man is righteous in the sight of God, but that we are all damned by the law: and then...teach them the testament and promises which God hath made unto us in Christ, and how much he loveth us in Christ.⁸

³ G. E. Duffield, ed., *The Work of William Tyndale* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1965), pp. v, xxxii.

⁴ W. Tyndale, *An Answer to Sir Thomas More's Dialogue* (ed. H. Walter; Cambridge: The University Press, 1850), p. 50.

⁵ Duffield, *Tyndale*, p. 149.

⁶ Duffield, *Tyndale*, pp. 157, 158.

⁷ Duffield, *Tyndale*, p. 113.

⁸ W. Tyndale, *Doctrinal Treatises* (ed. H. Walter; Cambridge: The University Press, 1848), p. 156.

He said that as the air is dark of itself, and receives its light from the sun, so people's hearts are dark with lies and receive their truth from God's word.

In this way people learn about their sinful nature and spiritual helplessness. His exposition of the doctrine of justification by faith alone, entitled *The Parable of the Wicked Mammon*, explained that people are

the enemies of God...under the power of the devil...so that it is impossible for us to consent to the will of God, much more is it impossible for a man to fulfil the law of his own strength and power, seeing that we are by birth and of nature the heirs of eternal damnation, as saith Paul, Eph. ii.

The natural man is led by his blind reason only.⁹

The work of God's Spirit

Tyndale went on to show that it is impossible to please God without the aid of his Spirit. To think otherwise only makes people more culpable before God because of pride. All that is done before the enlightenment of the Spirit is 'damnable sin'¹⁰ and 'a man must be first reconciled unto God by Christ, and in God's favour, ere his works can be good and pleasant in the sight of God.'¹¹

While people have no capacity to please God without his grace, they also have no capacity to deserve, or attract, or prepare themselves to receive that grace. 'We have no free-will to prevent [i.e. to act in anticipation of or in preparation for] God and his grace, and before grace prepare ourselves thereto; neither can we consent unto God before grace be come...we can do no good while we be evil,' said he, defending moreover God's righteousness in holding man responsible for the exercise of his will in favour of sin.¹²

How, then, if people are spiritually blind, captive to sin, under divine condemnation and unable to deserve or prepare for grace, can they turn to God? The renovation of the will, said Tyndale, depends on the enlightenment of the mind by God's word through the power of his Spirit. Not long before they both died as Protestant martyrs, William Tyndale wrote to John Frith:

expound the law [of God] truly...and prove all men sinners...and then, as a faithful minister...the mercy of our Lord Jesus...and then shall your

⁹ Tyndale, *Doctrinal Treatises*, pp. 47, 111.

¹⁰ Tyndale, *Doctrinal Treatises*, p. 183.

¹¹ Tyndale, *Answer to More*, p. 173.

¹² Tyndale, *Answer to More*, p. 174.

preaching be with power...and the Spirit of God shall work with you, and all consciences shall bear record unto you, and feel that it is so.¹³

Those who hear and heed the divine message will learn that God calls them to a new manner of thought and life. They are won to this not merely by warnings but also by the apprehension of the winsome love and mercy of Jesus Christ. His death most amply demonstrates God's love because his sacrifice fully satisfied all the demands of divine justice upon sinners. When the law of God makes clear our duty to him, and that we have not obeyed it, and that the penalty must be paid, the fact that Christ by his death has made a perfect atonement wonderfully shows his gracious love.

Such love calls for the dual responses of repentance and faith, which together make up the core and essence of Christian conversion.

In Tyndale's *Prologue to Romans* he referred to a 'man that hath forsaken sin, and is converted to put his trust in Christ, and to keep the law of God.'¹⁴ Clearly such a conversion is more than just a change of status before God. It includes a repentance which forsakes sin. There is a new volitional priority, a renovated life, oriented to obedience to the divine will. Tyndale opened his *Prologue to First Peter* by saying Peter wrote 'to the heathen that were converted,' exhorting them to stand fast in the faith and grow in it through suffering and good works. Repentance, and therefore conversion, is a radical, life-transforming phenomenon.¹⁵

'Story faith' and 'feeling faith'

The gracious love of Christ calls for both repentance and faith. *The Obedience of a Christian Man* taught that preaching the promises sets free as many as repent and believe.¹⁶ Tyndale made a clear distinction, however, between what he called 'story faith' and 'feeling faith.'

A story faith was for him a mere notional assent to God's truth without any personal application. The *Answer to More* stated, 'there is a story faith, without feeling in the heart, wherein I may believe all the story of the bible, and yet not set mine heart earnestly thereto, taking it for the food of my soul.'¹⁷ Some people believe that Christ died, yet fail to appreciate that he died for their sins, that his death is a sufficient

¹³ Duffield, *Tyndale*, p. 394. Frith was executed in 1533, Tyndale in 1536.

¹⁴ Duffield, *Tyndale*, p. 127.

¹⁵ Duffield, *Tyndale*, p. 163.

¹⁶ Tyndale, *Doctrinal Treatises*, p. 205.

¹⁷ Tyndale, *Answer to More*, p. 197.

satisfaction for their sins and that God for Christ's sake will be a Father to them.¹⁸

So he advocated what he often called 'a feeling faith,' a personal acceptance of all that Christ achieved for sinners, a fiduciary response to the divine promises. This is a commitment to God with trusting confidence. It is an individual appropriation of offered grace, a personal reliance upon divine promises. Feeling faith is volitional as well as intellectual, bringing a new nature, a new will to holiness, to serve and please God, an earnestness unknown to 'story faith.' The trustful heart is a repenting heart that turns to God in love and turns away from sin. As Tyndale wrote to Frith, 'he is our God, if we despair in ourselves, and trust in him, and his is the glory.'¹⁹

God's grace in election

But nobody could come to such a trust without God's Spirit's work in the heart. So we are led to the subject of election, which Tyndale dealt with in *The Parable of the Wicked Mammon*:

mark this process: first, we are damned of nature...secondarily, of the whole multitude of the nature of man, whom God hath elect and chosen, and to whom he hath appointed mercy and grace in Christ, to them sendeth he his Spirit; which openeth their eyes, sheweth them their misery, and bringeth them unto the knowledge of themselves...Then, lest they should flee from God by desperation, he comforteth them again with his sweet promises in Christ...and thus through faith they are set at peace with God.²⁰

Anticipating objections that such an assertion of sovereign choice, not conditioned by any considerations of human merit, a fixed divine purpose from eternity, necessarily impugns the divine justice, Tyndale called for meek humility before the high knowledge of God. It is not for us to ask, he said, why God chooses one and not another. He has the power and right to do with all his creatures as he chooses. Our darkness cannot perceive his light. 'Worldly wisdom cannot comprehend the wisdom of God.'²¹ To those who thought this doctrine might plunge into despair those who feared they were not elect, his counsel was to pray to God to

¹⁸ Tyndale, *Doctrinal Treatises*, p. 123.

¹⁹ Duffield, *Tyndale*, p. 397.

²⁰ Tyndale, *Doctrinal Treatises*, p. 89.

²¹ Tyndale, *Doctrinal Treatises*, p. 46.

send his Spirit to free them from their natural blindness and ignorance and give them a correct understanding of the things of God.²²

The inward appropriation of God's word of promise distinguishes the elect and gives them assurance. God has written his law in their hearts by his Holy Spirit and

Christ's elect church is the whole multitude of all repenting sinners that believe in Christ, and put all their trust and confidence in the mercy of God; feeling in their hearts that God for Christ's sake loveth them.²³

Furthermore Tyndale in his final letter to Frith reminded him that God continues to call out his elect people by the preaching of his word. 'Be cheerful,' he wrote, 'and remember that among the hard-hearted in England there is a number reserved by grace: for whose sakes, if need be, you must be ready to suffer.'²⁴

When the elect were converted to Christ, their affections altered and their conduct improved. In his *Exposition of Matthew 5-7* Tyndale laid out the logic by which those who turned to Christ do good works. The gospel brings a man to new life, deliverance from perdition, assured forgiveness and a cleansed conscience. It also alters him little by little, bringing the love of God into his heart together with the love of his law which issues in good works.²⁵ Good works neither satisfy God's law nor win salvation but they bring succour to neighbours and tame the flesh. Persistence in practical goodness was enjoined, with avoidance of scrupulosity.²⁶ Again and again occur references to 'lust to do the will of God' as an unailing mark of saving grace, while to God alone belong all praise and honour for good deeds.

Another duty too lay on all who knew the love of Christ, namely, 'I am bound to love the Turk,' said Tyndale, 'with all my might and power; yea, and above my power, even from the ground of my heart, after the ensample that Christ loved me; neither to spare my goods, body, or life, to win him to Christ.'²⁷

Tyndale's ideas about conversion lay no emphasis on the experience of turning to God. He was not concerned about a punctiliar crisis. He did not expect any decisive awareness of a process of spiritual change as the divine Spirit altered a person's cognition or volition. What he did emphasise was the consciousness of being in a converted or an

²² Tyndale, *Doctrinal Treatises*, pp. 88, 89.

²³ Tyndale, *Answer to More*, p. 30.

²⁴ Duffield, *Tyndale*, p. 399.

²⁵ Duffield, *Tyndale*, p. 266.

²⁶ Tyndale, *Doctrinal Treatises*, p. 331.

²⁷ Tyndale, *Doctrinal Treatises*, p. 96.

unconverted state. Again and again he stressed the importance of repentance from sin, coming into a personal relationship with Christ which included full confidence in his merciful promises and a new life of dedication to obey God's will. Plainly it is impossible to be unconscious of such responses to God.

Was Norman Pettit correct?

Here comment must be made on Norman Pettit's book, *The Heart Prepared*. The attention Pettit paid to William Tyndale is so brief and so partial that he leaves us with a distorted assessment of Tyndale's views. 'The English Reformer William Tyndale, who died in 1536,' he wrote, 'had been convinced of the blinding power of grace as a lightning flash, in accordance with Paul's conversion.' He went on, 'the early English Reformers had been preoccupied solely with...the requirement of grace as an instantaneous illumination.' Then he asserted, 'for Tyndale the archetypal conversion experience was that of Paul on the road to Damascus. Without anticipation or preparation of any kind man is suddenly seized, after which he repents of his sins.'²⁸

On the sole basis of a statement in the *Dictionary of National Biography*, Pettit claimed that between 1528 and 1530 Tyndale 'had officially adopted Zwingli's theology,' a theology which, he said, maintained that 'as in Paul's own conversion, the fallen creature was wrenched from sin to grace by the predestined, inscrutable will of God.'²⁹ In his Preface to the second edition of *The Heart Prepared* Pettit repeated this point: 'in orthodox Reformed theology of the sixteenth century no allowance had been made for preparation. In strict predestinarian dogma the sinner was taken by storm—the heart wrenched from depravity to grace.'³⁰

By contrast, David C. Steinmetz, writing about 'Reformation and Conversion,' said: 'common to almost all early Protestant discussions of repentance is a barely disguised hostility to every theory of conversion which stresses proper preparation for the reception of grace...the real preparation of grace...is the preparation which God has made by his election, calling and gifts.'³¹ This was Tyndale's view.

²⁸ Pettit, *Heart Prepared*, pp. 6, 13, 35.

²⁹ Pettit, *Heart Prepared*, pp. 34, 2.

³⁰ N. Pettit, *The Heart Prepared: grace and conversion in Puritan spiritual life* (2d ed.; Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1989), p. vii.

³¹ David C. Steinmetz, 'Reformation and Conversion,' *Theology Today* 35, 1978, pp. 26, 27.

Certainly Tyndale referred to the sudden, unexpected conversion of Saul of Tarsus. But he never remotely suggested that this established a norm or model or standard by which, in God's purposes, all converts would experience 'instantaneous illumination' or be 'suddenly seized' or 'taken by storm.'

Tyndale and Luther

We turn now to a brief comparison of Tyndale's teaching with Luther's. Enduring persistence in a life of faith and good works was the fruit of conversion and Tyndale insisted on this in places where Luther did not, including in Tyndale's translations of Luther. David Daniell noticed this, saying, 'a full parallel text, Luther alongside Tyndale, would show that Tyndale adds to Luther's words, over and over again, description of the effect of the gift of faith on personality, a genuine alteration, something visible. He is recording a conversion experience, a transformation.'³² Gervase Duffield wrote, 'Tyndale was not merely copying Luther, as has sometimes been alleged, for he adds whole sections of his own, amounting to about a quarter of the whole work.'³³ 'The whole work' to which Duffield refers is Tyndale's *Prologue to Romans*, a translation or paraphrase of Luther's *Preface to Romans*. Leonard Trinterud made close comparative studies of the work of Luther and Tyndale and his reappraisal showed some previously unnoticed differences.³⁴

However, Trinterud made no reference to conversion vocabulary, which is another previously unnoticed difference. Tyndale used it where Luther did not. Here are three examples. First, in his *Prologue to Romans* Tyndale said if a man has 'forsaken sin, and is converted to put his trust in Christ, and to keep the law of God' falls and fails, it is because of insufficient 'meditation in God, and in his wonderful deeds, and in the manifold covenants of his mercy.'³⁵ Here is a second example, from the *Exposition of Matthew 5-7*. All Christians experience the conflict between

³² David Daniell, *William Tyndale: a Biography* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), p. 164.

³³ Duffield, *Tyndale*, p. 119.

³⁴ L. J. Trinterud, 'A Reappraisal of William Tyndale's Debt to Martin Luther,' *Church History* XXXI, 1962. The bibliography of Daniell's *William Tyndale* does not include Trinterud's article, but Daniell remarked that 'a detailed study is needed of how Luther's notes are translated or occasionally altered, and what might be the difference in content and manner between Luther's and Tyndale's.' p. 118.

³⁵ Duffield, *Tyndale*, p. 127.

the Spirit of God and the 'evil lusts and sin' within them,³⁶ and Tyndale described the conflict in this way:

the sin we do before our conversion is forgiven clearly through faith, if we repent, and submit ourselves to a new life. And the sin we do against our wills, (I mean the will of the Spirit; for after our conversion we have two wills, fighting one against the other,) that sin is also forgiven us through faith, if we repent and submit ourselves to amend.³⁷

Yet another example soon followed. No matter how much some may dream of faith, they have no faith at all, 'no promise, except they be converted to a new life.'³⁸

Tyndale summed up his chief emphases in his *Prologue to Romans*, when dealing with the fifth chapter of the epistle:

faith only, before all works, justifieth...where the Spirit is, there it is always summer, and there are always good fruits, that is to say, good works...faith cometh by hearing the word of God...where the word of God is preached purely, and received in the heart, there is faith, and the Spirit of God...no man can bring himself out of sin unto righteousness...we must needs have Christ to justify us with his grace.³⁹

Conclusion

This survey of Tyndale's work has provided answers to questions posed earlier. He did not believe that people can prepare themselves to receive divine grace, nor did he propose any standard model of conversion. He introduced conversion vocabulary into some of his translations of Luther, a fact apparently unnoticed hitherto, and placed much more emphasis than Luther did on the importance of a renovated life, full of good works, as part of the fruit of conversion.

We conclude that William Tyndale made a valuable contribution to theological ideas about conversion in the early years of the English Reformation. He taught that the Bible bears God's authority, that faithful preaching is the usual means through which people are converted, and that conversion is the consciousness of a change in personal relationship with God which includes a change of mind and will, turning to God in

³⁶ Duffield, *Tyndale*, p. 128.

³⁷ Duffield, *Tyndale*, p. 254.

³⁸ Duffield, *Tyndale*, p. 255.

³⁹ Duffield, *Tyndale*, pp. 135, 136.

repentance, faith in Christ and surrender of the heart to be sanctified by his Spirit.

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